

THE WHITE HOUSE

TOP SECRET [REDACTED]

WASHINGTON

ACTION

9 October 1969

MEMORANDUM FOR THE PRESIDENT

FROM: Henry A. Kissinger

SUBJECT: Air Reconnaissance of South China

On March 22, 1969, you approved resumption of aerial reconnaissance over South China which had been suspended since March 27, 1968. This authority was limited to overflights by the 147 H/T drone and all missions were subject to prior approval by the 303 Committee on a monthly basis.

Since that time, for a variety of reasons, including the altered situation following the EC-121 shootdown off of North Korea, your trip to Southeast Asia and the easing of trade and travel restrictions with Communist China, no drone missions have actually been flown over South China.

The question of authorizing four improved 147T drone overflights of South China during October has been the subject of considerable deliberation in recent meetings of the 303 Committee. These deliberations have been complicated by the Department of Defense desire to also run an operational test mission over South China of its new very high altitude, very high speed, drone known as TAGBOARD and by CIA's view that the U-2R would be the most effective and least provocative collection platform.

The SR-71 also has a high collection capability but would presumably be considered more provocative by the Chinese because it would be known

[REDACTED] CIA points out that in previous losses of the older more vulnerable U-2's over Communist China, no political repercussions were directed at the United States.

It is agreed that the 147T drone is effective in obtaining photography of priority tactical intelligence targets which the Department of Defense strongly desires to update in the areas of South China bordering North Vietnam, Laos and Burma.

CIA concurs in the Defense need for priority tactical intelligence in these areas but notes that the 147T drone overflights would provide little in the way of needed strategic intelligence photography. For this reason, CIA advocates use of the U-2R which can obtain photography satisfying both priority strategic and tactical requirements, such as photography of

NSC review(s) completed.

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potential missile deployment areas, suspect nuclear energy installations and the posture of Chinese air and ground forces.

Both Defense and CIA are in accord that satellite reconnaissance has been unable to satisfy either tactical or strategic photographic intelligence requirements because of normal heavy cloud cover in the area plus its location near the equator which limits satellite access to targets in the region.

No overflight penetrations deeper than 600 miles across the South Chinese Communist border are proposed. Most tactical intelligence is obtainable within 200 miles of the border, but certain targets of considerable strategic interest are located within the 600 mile range.

The risk of shootdown of an SR-71 or TAGBOARD drone is virtually zero. The U-2R has an average survivability factor ranging from 92.5% during each single SAM site engagement if it flies directly overhead to 99.6% if attacked by MIG-21's. All known SAM sites are avoided in the planned flight path. The 147T drones have approximately the same survivability factors as the U-2 to attack by either SAMs or MIGs. In using any of these platforms the Chinese will know their territory is being overflown for the first time in 18 months.

The Department of State opposes resumption of any overflights at this time for the following reasons:

- a. It is not persuaded that the intelligence requirements and prospects of successful collection override the political considerations. Intelligence on tactical targets would be important if other available intelligence suggested that the Chinese Communists might be preparing to intervene in North Vietnam. However, no member of the intelligence community has concluded from the considerable flow of intelligence now available [] that this is the case. In the absence of such indicators State does not believe a requirement for sensitive collection has been adequately established.
- b. Politically, the Administration has repeatedly publicly expressed its desire for more friendly relationships with Communist China and has taken steps to ease trade and travel restrictions. The Administration is also on the point of attempting to renew the Warsaw talks, having just instructed our Ambassador to make contact. The Department believes that overflights by any vehicle at this time could mitigate against Chinese agreement to resumption of these talks by giving those in Peking opposed to resumption a talking point. Additionally, the Administration would be subject to criticism if it subsequently became known that just at the time when approach was being made in Warsaw, overflights had been resumed.

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The Attorney General and I support the Department of Defense and CIA view that overflights of South China should be resumed in order to collect priority intelligence. The United States has continued to fly U-2 and other peripheral intelligence collection flights along Communist China's coastal areas during the 18-month overflight stand-down period. We believe the Chinese will consider the overflights to be an extension of this activity designed to collect intelligence on their activities related to Vietnam, Laos, Thailand and Burma. We do not believe the Chinese would be seriously concerned about collection in these border areas, as they surely would be in the case of overflights of their strategic installations in other areas deep in their territory.

In light of the opposition of the State Department to resumption of overflights of South China, the essential question for your decision is whether collection of any intelligence by aerial overflight is worth the possible political risks involved.

If your decision is to again authorize overflights, I believe the 303 Committee can reach agreement on which platform or platforms should be used on a mission by mission basis based upon priority targeting requirements, unless you yourself wish to designate which platforms shall be used.

The options therefore are as follows:

- a. Authorize resumption of overflights of South China for priority intelligence collection purposes subject to mission by mission approval of the 303 Committee.

APPROVE _____ DISAPPROVE _____ OTHER _____

- b. Such intelligence collection overflights shall be conducted only by

(1) 147T drone ☒ _____

(2) U-2R _____

(3) SR-71 _____

(4) TAGBOARD drone ☒ _____

(5) Platform decision to be made by 303 Committee _____

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1 December 1969

MEMORANDUM FOR THE RECORD

SUBJECT: Minutes of the Meeting of the 303 Committee,
25 November 1969

PRESENT: Mr. Kissinger, Mr. Mitchell, Mr. Packard, Mr. Johnson,
and Mr. Helms

General Alexander Haig and Mr. Wymberley DeR. Coerr
were also present.

Aerial Reconnaissance and U.S. Policy toward China

After a brief discussion of Mr. Johnson's memorandum to Mr. Kissinger, dated 17 November 1969 [redacted] setting forth the State Department's position in opposition to further 147T drone overflights of South China, the Chairman stated that he would send forward to higher authority a memorandum reflecting the respective views of the Committee members and including Mr. Johnson's memorandum as an attachment.

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Distribution

Mr. Mitchell
Mr. Packard
Mr. Johnson
Mr. Helms

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